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ABSTRACT

There are a variety reasons for teaching about Japan. Many students in the United States are of Japanese heritage; Japan is the second largest trading partner of the United States; and some healing still needs to occur between the United States and Japan because of the damage and pain of World War II. Further, the Unites States and Japan share the Pacific Ocean, its waters and fisheries. Mutual cultural understanding and effective communication skills are necessary for the best use of these shared resources. Many primary teachers excel at teaching about Japan through activities about food, language, holidays, and artifacts. Learning about Japan through the visual arts also should be a part of this list of activities. Visual thinking provides the opportunity to focus carefully on an image in order to recall and reproduce it at a later time; to delve into an image in order to understand its deeper implications; and to take time to look at an image in order to provide a place of serenity and quiet in the midst of a fast, harried world. Two- and three-dimensional representations are powerful ways by which to integrate Japanese studies into curricular areas and into the development of critical thinking skills. The ideas in this ERIC Digest are offered to stimulate thinking about Japanese art, visual thinking, and practical ways for studying about Japan using art. Lessons can be integrated into other curriculum areas including mathematics and social studies. (Contains 11 references.) (LB)

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Teaching Primary School Children about Japan through Art

By Patricia Berg Ward

There are many reasons for teaching about Japan. Many students in the United States are of Japanese heritage; Japan is the second largest trading partner of the United States; and some healing still needs to occur between the U.S. and Japan after the damage and pain of World War II. Further, the U.S. and Japan share the Pacific and its waters and fisheries. Mutual cultural understanding and effective communication skills are necessary for the best use of these shared resources.

Many primary teachers excel at teaching about Japan through means such as food, language, holidays, and artifacts. Visual art should be added to this list. Two- and three-dimensional representations are powerful ways by which to integrate Japanese studies into curricular areas and into development of critical thinking skills.

The ideas of this *Digest* are offered to stimulate thinking about Japanese art, visual thinking, and practical applications for the study of Japan using art. Additional lessons on teaching Japanese art are available at <www.indiana.edu/~japan>.

Understanding Japanese Art. Some familiarity with Japanese aesthetics will enhance any exploration of Japanese art. *Wabi*, *sabi*, and *suki* are important yet illusive concepts that explain the notion of Japanese beauty. *Wabi* denotes simplicity and quietude and incorporates rustic beauty, such as patterns found in straw, bamboo, clay, or stone. It refers to both that which is made by nature and that which is made by man. *Sabi* refers to the patina of age, the concept that changes due to use may make an object more beautiful and valuable. This incorporates an appreciation of the cycles of life and careful, artful mending of damage. *Suki* means subtle elegance referring to beauty in accidental creation or unconventional forms.

Visual Literacy. In this age of instant response to increasingly fast moving images, some aspects of our visual thinking abilities are in danger of being lost. One is the ability to focus on an image, looking carefully at it in order to recall and reproduce it later. Another is the ability to delve into an image in order to understand its deeper implications. A third is the ability to take time to look. Learning to take this time can provide a place of serenity and quiet in the midst of a fast, harried world.

Exploring a piece of art involves asking a series of questions. To begin, make sure the children know the origin of the piece and can locate Japan on a map. Then ask, "What is the artist showing you in this piece of art from Japan?" or "What does this piece of art show you about life in Japan?" As each child provides an answer, paraphrase it for the whole group and ask either, "Do the rest of you agree with what ____ said?" or "What else can you tell us about this picture?" "What color palette is the artist using?" "What shapes do you see?" "Where?" "Do you see places where some shapes are repeated?" "Where are these?" "Why do you think the artist repeated the shapes?" "Tell me about the lines you see." Ask the children to describe specific features of the image. Ask them how these features are the same or different from those of images familiar to them. Ask the children to imagine that they could walk into the work of art. Ask, "Where would you walk into this picture?" and "Where would you go once you were in the picture and what would you do there?" The children can draw their answers to the last question and share these with the group later.

Not all of the above questions need to be explored at once. If the class were studying color or shape, for example, a few images could be shown and only the relevant questions asked. The class might explore the images looking at a theme topic, for example, the weather, homes, or seasons. Remember that repeated viewings of the images are important. Working with two visual images is a favorite activity for primary age children as they discover similarities and differences. For example, juxtapose an image of Japan with an image from the children's lives. In telling how the Japanese image is different from and similar to theirs, the children begin to comprehend what they see. By describing how the Japanese image is different, the children begin to perceive the image as familiar, no longer foreign. To facilitate understanding, ask questions such as, "What can you tell me about the ____?" Architectural forms such as homes are useful for exploring in this fashion; so are food, clothing, and musical instruments.

Any collection of objects from Japan can be classified as art pieces. These might be dishes or cups, objects of traditional clothing, containers, decorative papers, or origami. These can be used for visual thinking exercises as well. Ask the children to group the items according to use or type. Ask "What makes you say that?" After each response, then ask, "Does anyone else have a different idea?" Students could also group these items by color or shape. The same techniques could be used with collections of pictures of art pieces. Give small groups of children each a different collection and ask them to divide it into categories. Ask them to explain their choices to the larger group. Alternatively, copies of a single collection could be given to each group so that all students are exploring the same collection of images.

Infusing Japanese Art into Existing Curricula. It is possible to initiate a unit on "Japan through Art" by addressing a global issue connected to art, such as recycling and reusing paper.

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Tell students that in Japan, paper is treasured and that historically, Japanese people have found many ways to recycle and reuse their special papers. A study of an array of Japanese papers can be followed by a technology lesson where the children make paper. This can include a study of recycling if the children use paper which would otherwise be thrown away. A fascinating connection with Japanese history can be made to the Heian Period (794-1191) by having the children recycle cards or letters from loved ones into new paper. This was done by aristocrats of that period, who then inscribed *sutras* (prayers) for the dead on the paper. An historical recycling connection can be made by teaching the Japanese art form of *yaburitsugi*. Paper was once so precious that even tiny scraps were saved. In this case raggedly torn pieces of paper too beautiful to be thrown away can be collaged together on a backing sheet to make a piece of art paper. Imagine using this technique with bits and pieces of old Christmas, Valentine's Day, and birthday cards, and wrapping paper.

An elementary school in Japan once displayed a large outline of a Japanese character which had been filled with small pieces of unusual papers. The same could be done in any school. Show students the outline of a Japanese character (or an outline of Mt. Fuji, the Great Wave, a pagoda, temple, or the like) and ask them how long they think it will take to fill it with interesting papers which would otherwise be thrown away. Ask them how many beautiful examples of paper they think they can find and save to use in Japanese art projects which would otherwise be garbage. This tells the students to begin looking at paper with a new eye: they begin to practice *sabi*. Brainstorm where they might find their paper. The children should pay special attention to saving construction paper and sorting it by color. These scraps can be used for papermaking.

Lessons can be integrated into other curriculum areas. A math connection can be made by making a graph of shapes or patterns from Japanese art; the children then write their names in the column for their favorite. Another math activity uses pictures from a book of reproducible Japanese designs which children can cut and paste to make a pattern. Primary students love to make clothes from whatever culture they are studying. When studying Japan, students can use grocery bags to make vests, the type sometimes worn over *yukata* (lightweight summer kimono). The children can choose their favorite design elements to create patterns for their vests. (For a free vest pattern, contact the ERIC Adjunct Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies toll-free at 800-266-3815.)

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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